

THE EXOTIC IN ATWOOD: THE 'VEIL' AND CONTESTATIONS OF POWER IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale is a dark dystopian tale that has enjoyed popularity since the 1980's due to its unique treatment of gender power relations. This paper will discuss the role that Offred, the handmaid, plays within male/female power equations especially in relation to her use of the feminine space of the veil to set up a female enclave from where she can resist male mastery and suppression. Within the context of Foucault's Panopticon law of visibility and surveillance, the feminine trope of the veil takes on symbolic significance acting as a strong-hold, a shield that protects Offred from the intrusive male gaze yet gives her the opportunity to surveil and take control of her environment. Though at different points in the narrative, she is forced to play the public role of handmaid and/or the private role of a courtesan, she manages to use the sanctity of her veiled space to manipulate the visual contingencies of the system and reverse power equations. By the end of the narrative, the Commander is shown to have lost all vestiges of power and is entrapped into the very same constraints of gender power equations he helped set up in Gileadean patriarchal society. This paper will show that it is actually from within the heart of the Muslim paradigm of the veil that power emanates and forms a strong-hold of resistance against suppression and/or denigration. The veil in its physical and metaphorical meanings becomes a woman's tool of empowerment, a safe-haven that allows her to be 'impenetrable' and unquantifiable yet assertive in her search for power. The positive insinuations that come with the veil open up other avenues of investigation that dismantle many other 'universal' concepts of 'freedom' and 'oppression' as defined by Euro-American discourse.

KEYWORDS: Gender Power Equations, The Paradigm of the Veil, The Gaze, Dystopian Fiction, Postcolonial Studies, Orientalism & Atwood

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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dark dystopian tale set in the near-future (2100) recounting the events that follow the overthrow of the U.S government by a Christian theocracy. This theocracy claims to have come into power for the benefit of society which had until then been overridden by the ills of feminism, pollution and wars. This in many ways mirrors the political environment that was unfolding around Atwood in the 1980's. As conservatives and the religious right began to take power in many European and American countries, feminists began to fear the loss of women's rights which had taken them decades to acquire.

In this dystopian tale, Atwood's imagination runs wild as she depicts a society that is a distorted version of old New England Puritan traditions mixed in with some 'exotic' practices of the Muslim world. The story line picks up on many real incidents that occurred in American history in addition to first-hand portrayals of modern-day conservative Muslim countries, like Afghanistan, that converge to portray a fictitious

society that is neither of the past, present or future. Clothing practices take on special relevance in this Gileadean society where parallels keep being drawn between old New England cultural traditions and modern-day practices of the Muslim world. In an article published in 2001, Atwood reveals that women's outfits in the *Handmaid's Tale* "derived in part from nuns' costumes, partly from schoolgirls' hemlines, partly - I must admit - from the faceless woman on the Old Dutch Cleanser box, but also partly from the chador I acquired in Afghanistan" (Atwood 2001).

Atwood's trip to Afghanistan seems to have had a major impact on her story. When asked if her book would have turned out the same without her visit to Afghanistan, her simple retort of "unlikely" reveals the extent to which she was affected by Muslim traditions. She was particularly fascinated by the chador which she sometimes described as a "negative space, a blank visual field," while at other times awarded the privilege given to old Western traditions that called for women to be 'decently' dressed in public. In spite of the different range of emotions this "Muslim cover-up" invoked in Atwood, she firmly believed that "Such a space has the power of a sort" (Atwood 2001). This is clearly manifested in *The Handmaid's Tale* where veiling practices extend beyond their physical function and become representative of wider social and political struggles. Though the old cultural traditions of Western cultures (Catholic, Puritan, etc.) as they appear in Gileadean clothing practices are discussed quite comprehensively in the works of literary critics, the Muslim frame of reference is minimally explored and only then through an Orientalist point of view.

As a text that is rich in male/female, colonizer/colonized power discourses, Atwood's narrative has caught the attention of many feminist and postcolonial critics. Frederick Patterson, Julia Hsieh, Karen Stein and David Coad have given special attention to the relationship that exists between oppression, resistance and narrative in relation to gender politics. Their essays offer critical investigations into male/female power dynamics as manifested through power discourses. The fact that their research is exponentially based on Euro-American systems of thought and value, however, has confined their scope of analysis. In interpreting the text only in the context of a Euro-American frame of reference that considers most veiling practices as attempts at erasing female identity and power, their essays fail to explore the possible relationship that may exist between the Muslim practice of veiling and female empowerment. Even when a critic, like Karen Stein, describes Atwood as a Scheherazade, who is not afraid to narrate stories of female empowerment, stereotypical images of the Muslim exotic over-ride any possible positive insinuations of empowerment.

In disengaging from the hold of Euro-American power discourses that represent veiling practices as oppressive and confining, this essay hopes to offer an alternative reading that does not universalize all human experience or disregard subaltern forms of discourse. Breaking free from the hold of dominant power discourses, other gender-specific power formations are allowed to take shape and to imbue the text with new meaning. As such, limited Euro-American notions of the function of the veil take a backseat to a whole series of positive metaphors of safe-havens, "cocoons" and impenetrable power-houses that resituate the veil within its original spiritual Muslim domain (Atwood 1985, 180). The veil as depicted in relation to Offred becomes a stronghold, a safe-haven where she can be invisible to the world yet in full control of her environment, where she can 'see' without 'being seen' and plan her escape from this 'phantasmic' dystopia. Quint essentially, the veil becomes a metaphoric wall that counteracts the Panoptican law of visibility and surveillance and resituates power back within the domain of the feminine. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the trope of the veil becomes an occasion to re-politicize exoticism and to use its often enigmatic features to contest veiled strategies of power in the Euro-American discourse.

VISIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Built on a legacy of Euro-American ideology that ties the power to knowledge, the patriarchal regime at Gilead enforces its control through complete visibility and transparency of its population. As women are the receptors of male patriarchal rules, they are placed under strict surveillance so as to ensure their submission. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred finds herself surveilled by everyone in the household. Maids, drivers, aunts, Serena, other handmaids, guards at checkpoints, doctors in addition to the Commander himself make it their business to capture every movement or word that Offred enunciates. This Panoptican system of surveillance described by Michel Foucault in "Discipline and Punish" gives an indication of the impact that Euro-American ideology of power has on society and individuals. As people submit to this force of power that "invests them, is transmitted by them and through them," they automatically accede to its monopolizing power and become its strongest advocates (1998, 550). Visibility, being a primary condition in the surveillance and control of the individuals, the opposite condition of invisibility and darkness stands in direct threat to the maintenance of this power.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred becomes the primary object of perusal in the household as she goes about her daily functions. Her food is measured and monitored to ensure maximum nutrition, her bath is drawn with complete accuracy so as to achieve proper hygiene and her chores are planned ahead by Aunt Lydia so as to ensure that she is always "protected." When Offred is allowed to go shopping for groceries in the beginning of the story, it is with the condition that she be accompanied by another hand maid. Offred states that "This is supposed to be for our protection. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (Atwood 1996, 29). Though she would like to converse freely with this woman who shares her same function in life as a handmaid, she decides to stay silent in case she is one of the 'eyes' of the totalitarian regime. Fear of being caught or discovered a traitor to the system induces handmaid's to self-regulate and become "the principle of [their] own" and other women's "subjection" (Foucault 1998, 556).

In acknowledging her role as both invigilator as well as object of invigilation, Offred gives full recognition to the law of visibility and transparency in relation to the functioning of the Gileadean system. This system demands that everything in society is observable and knowable, yet it also decrees that handmaid's remain disguised under a multitude of paraphernalia, their bodies invisible to the eye and touch of everyone except their commanders. This paradoxical situation becomes even more complicated when the colour 'red' of the handmaid's habit is added to the equation. Taught to be humble, demure and invisible, the colour 'red' put them in a highly conspicuous and vulnerable position. Offred's conscious awareness of the role she must play within the system becomes her strong point as she learns to manipulate its visual contingencies to her advantage. Michael Foucault states that the major effect of the Panoptican is to "induce... a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assure the automatic functioning of power" (1998, 554). This visibility, however, can also function as a "trap." Foucault explains that the gaze can also function in the reverse direction and authority-figures may unknowingly find themselves on the receiving end of this gaze (554). Offred's power lies in her ability to recognize the role that the male gaze plays within power discourses and to use the privacy and sanctity of the feminine trope of the veil as "that punctiform object, that point of vanishing being" where she can "resist that mastery of vision" and reverse the gaze back on the other (Lacan 1998, 83-89).>>>>

THE GAZE

From early on in the story, we find that Offred acknowledges the presence and influence of the Panoptican gaze on her life. When she recalls her days at the center, she vividly remembers the aunts who would patrol their rooms at night to

make sure that no one escaped. Despite the fact that the center was protected by a “chain-link fence topped with barbed wire,” there was always fear that the girls would disappear out of visibilities’ range (Atwood 1986, 14). As Offred later moves into ‘Fred’s’ household, she also becomes aware of the surveillance that happens both on the inside and outside of the house. Guards and lights screen the outside parameters, while everyone in the household keeps her at a close distance watching her every move. In the presence of such surveillance, Offred learns to use what Orientalists consider to be the “instrument of her subjection” as exemplified in the veil as her tool of empowerment (Coad 2001, 55). Recognizing the advantage that the veil offers her in terms of sanctity and privacy, she becomes adept at using its strong-points to gain control over her life. These strengths manifest themselves at three different levels of consciousness: the first level comprises of her awareness of being under the scrutiny of the Panoptican gaze on account of her feminine position; the second is her recognition of the possibility of using the veil as a cocoon that protects her from the male gaze yet gives her the freedom to gaze back from “the point of vanishing being” unnoticed by the other; and the third is her acknowledgment of the opportunity that lies within this private space in terms of functioning as a safe-haven where she can contemplate and plan her way towards empowerment (Lacan 1998, 83).

Taken together, these levels not only point to Offred’s ability to understand how the system works, but more importantly, it reveals her ability to manipulate the system and subvert its power equations. From early on in the story, Offred is shown to understand the role that the gaze plays in discourses of power. When she leaves the house in chapter four to go grocery shopping, the incident with the guard reveals her familiarity with the dynamics of the gaze. As the guard at the check-point asks her to show her pass and then hands it back, he is depicted as purposefully bending his head to get a good look at her face which is partially covered by the veil. Offred’s gesture of lifting her head up and allowing him to have a more thorough look shows her willingness to experiment with this male gaze. The ensuing “blush” that appears on the guard’s face not only reveals the effect that her femininity has had on him, but more importantly, it becomes indicative of his conscious awareness of being caught in what Lacan considers to be the act of ‘looking’ and ‘desiring’ (1998, 82-85).

Richard Feldstien in Reading Seminar XI tries to summarize the workings of Lacan’s theory of the gaze as: “Now I am the object of the other’s gaze and the target of unknowable desires and judgments. I am no longer the eye or ‘I’ of consciousness, that is, I am no longer the one that sees what I want to see, but rather I am seen in a way that I don’t want to be seen” (1995, 185). Caught in the act of looking, the guard not only finds himself on the receiving end of Offred’s gaze, but also experiences ‘shame’ in having had his desires exposed in public. The “exposed face” that appears in front of her reveals a man whose weaknesses have been ‘unveiled’ in front of the supposedly weaker other. The narrator’s final comment that “He is the one who turns away” becomes indicative of his inability to face his failure as a man. As a reversal of roles has been achieved, Offred expresses joy at having become in control of the situation. Her confession, “I find that I’m not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power” (Atwood 1985, 31-32) reveals a deep-seated desire to challenge the norms and reverse gender power equations.

Offred’s propensity to resist patriarchal control and gain mastery becomes even more evident in her relationship with the Commander. The more time she spends with him, the more determined she becomes to be reserved but remain vigilant and aware of all that is going around her. In the scene where the whole household gathers in the living room to attend the preliminary proceedings of the ‘ceremony,’ each member of staff is shown to take his allotted place according to his function within the system. As the Commander comes in, he notices that one woman in red was kneeling (Offred), one woman in blue was seated (Serena), two in green were standing (the maids), while “a solitary man, thin-faced” stood in the

background (Nick) (Atwood 1985, 97). The narrator notes that “the posture of the body is important, here and now” since it gives an indication of each person’s function and value within the household (89). Offred’s kneeling posture is symbolic of the submissive role she must play in relation to Serena while her close vicinity becomes indicative of the dutiful sexual function she must perform as a “two-legged womb” to Serena’s infertile body(146).

In this particular scene, the Commander’s large leather chair is positioned in front of his household as he reads excerpts from the Bible. Sitting on the opposite side of everyone else, including his wife, he marks his position as ‘over-seer’ and master of the house, as the one who has the all-important position of teaching morals, setting standards and over-seeing their implementation. Everyone in the room seems to be transfixed by the Commander’s authoritative stature and is conscious of his every move. It is Offred, however, who has the courage to use her “invisible” position behind the veil to gaze back at him, to “watch him from within” and search for signs of softness that she can use against him. As she listens to him read, her foremost thought is: “But watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I’ve got my eyes on you” (Atwood 1985, 99).

The Commander later invites Offred to come visit him in the privacy of his office and she reluctantly agrees. She notes that “My presence here is illegal. It is forbidden for us to be alone with the Commanders. We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans” (Atwood 1985, 146). Conscious of the role that is imposed on her by Gileadean society, she becomes alarmed at the Commander’s propensity to disregard laws. When they meet, he showers her with many pleasures and privileges with the intention of keeping her coming for more. He provides her with books, magazines, and cosmetic treats from pre-Gileadean days in the hope that these mementos will create an emotional bond between them. Offred’s ability to disengage herself from these pleasures and to stay focused and observant, however, thwart his attempts at manipulation. Her initial assessment of the situation that “May be none of this is about control. Maybe it isn’t really who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it” is replaced with the conviction that it is really “about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it”(145). Although the Commander has complete physical control over Offred, his wish is also to attain hegemony over her emotions. Conscious of the master/slave dialectic that is already in place, he seeks to create a more biding male/female polemics where the female is so emotionally involved with the male that she is willing to overlook and ‘forgive’ his vices and even seeks new ways to partake in her own victimization.()

As the Commander and Offred continue to meet in private, his obsession with achieving complete mastery causes him to lose touch with reality. In replacing his assigned public role of commander with the more perverse role of sexual predator, he loses his authenticity and any relevant hold on power that that position might entitle him to. In the scene in chapter twenty-nine where he intently gazes on Offred as she reads a book reveals the true dynamics at work between them. As she reads her book and he intently stares at her, this male gaze is described in terms of a violently incapacitating “sexual act” performed on her body without her consent (Atwood 1985, 194). This gaze has such a penetrating effect that she not only becomes the object of his ‘look,’ but more importantly endures the dilemma of becoming the object of his ‘desires.’ Lacan in *The Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* explains this intrusive male gaze as the end result of the act of ‘looking’ conjoined with the act of ‘desiring.’ He says that as the male looks at the female, what he actually sees is a projection of his deepest desires rather than actual reality (1998, 85). As the Commander makes Offred the subject of his male fantasies irrespective of the assigned role she must play as handmaid, he disengages from his role as enforcer of laws and becomes the victim of his own perverse imagination.

REVERSING THE GAZE; FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

As Offred presses her eyes closer to “the crack in the wall” that is his vulnerability and continues to observe him from behind her wall of reserved demeanor, she is able to acquire the necessary knowledge to fortify herself against his advances and to use his vulnerabilities to gain power over him (Atwood 1985, 146). When he invites her to play the forbidden game of scrabble, for instance, she uses this game to stimulate her dormant reservoir of language that has been curtailed by the denial of any sort of cognitive stimulation. As she starts to put words together, her mind is awakened from its dormant state and her spirit is enlivened with hope. With every strong word she forms, like “Larynx,” “Valence,” and “Quince,” she experiences the joy of re-appropriating language and using its nuisances to express herself without inhibitions. Re-discovering her will-power through language, she wins the first round of scrabble only to decide that she is confident enough “to let him win the second” (149). Offred’s re-connection with her old independent self brings with it greater resolve to resist the patriarchal hegemony and the oppressive practices of Gilead. As she practices enunciating powerful linguistic formations, she manages to build a metaphoric wall of protection that shields her from the intrusive male gaze. What privacy she loses when shedding her physical veil upon entering the Commander’s office, she soon replaces by a metaphoric shield of words and discourses that reassign power within her domain. Cocooned within this web of language, knowledge and authority, she quietly shuns the male gaze and becomes the one who has power to surveil, plan and exercise control.

Offred’s decision to continue to indulge the Commander’s quirks despite his flaws of character also become a lesson in female empowerment. After spending a few evenings with the Commander, she comes to the realization that “I have power over him... although it’s of an equivocal kind” (Atwood 1985, 221). Expected to fulfill the submissive role of handmaid but actually enacting the part of mistress in private, Offred uses both public and private roles to allure the Commander into falling within her ‘invisible’ sphere of influence. Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” draws a close association between cinema and the male primordial need for pleasure looking. She explains that as the dominant male gaze identifies with the lens of the camera, the female finds herself objectified under the spectator’s powerful stare. Within the male-dominated world where “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female,” the female becomes a projection of male fantasies rather than actual reality (Mulvey 1989, 19). As Offred finds herself objectified in the role of handmaid qua mistress, she uses the sanctity of the private space exemplified in the veil to resist all attempts at suppression or emotional abuse. Her veiled demeanor becomes a strong hold from where she reflects the gaze back on the other and keeps him entrapped into her web of power from a point unobserved by the other.

Both roles that Offred takes on as public handmaid and private mistress have been enforced upon her by superior authorities. Finding herself in this paradoxical role and unable to rebel openly, she uses the invisibility offered by her private space to manipulate the system and use its visual contingencies to her advantage. In unveiling the weaknesses of the Commander yet shielding her own behind a veiled wall of the reservation, she turns her visits to his private office into “bargaining sessions,” marking them as opportunities for things “to be exchanged”. Standing adamant in not “giving anything away: selling only,” she manages to ‘sell’ a false representation of herself as a meek and docile woman ready to please her commander, while what she manages to get ‘in return’ is the chance to use the private space of her veiled demeanor as a strong-hold from where she can reflect the gaze back on the other in an act of defiant rebelliousness (Atwood 1985, 148).

What physical power Offred is denied in Gilead, she tries to make up for through her mental capabilities. In the scene where the Commander subjects her to the force of his powerful gaze as she reads a book, Offred finds a way to counter attack this intrusion of privacy by performing the more intense mental act of 'undressing' his thoughts and using them to gain mastery over him (Atwood 1985, 194). The Commander is under the faulty belief that whatever treats he bestows upon her will bring her pleasure and gratitude. This belief is offset by Offred's conscious awareness of his need for mastery and by her resolve to put up a wall of reservation that makes her immune to these pleasures yet rational enough to plan her way towards empowerment.

In chapter thirty-six when the Commander takes Offred on an escapade to Jesebel's, her role shifts from a partial hand maid into full courtesan. Given a costume of "feathers, mauve and pink" and told to wear makeup, Offred takes on the public role of mistress (Atwood 1985, 242). Though she admits to herself that she is happy to "break the monotony," "to subvert the perceived respectable order of things," she consciously decides "not to seem too eager" but instead to make him feel that "she is doing him a favour." Her ability to reflect the gaze back on the Commander and expose "his deep-down real desire" finds fruition here (243). As she experiences the exotic world at this brothel, she comes to an even deeper understanding of his personality. His desire to take her to Jisebel's and to pass her as a mistress or "evening rental" surpasses the simple need to exercise power and extends to a far more self-destructive need to "demonstrate" and flaunt his disregard of rules in the face of others (248). He could have taken a real evening rental with him to the brothel, but his desire to flaunt his grip on power, even under the watch of other important officials, becomes a discernible blemish in the Panoptican system of surveillan ceat Gilead.

In reflecting her gaze on the Commander and bringing his weaknesses to the surface, Offred is able to resist his attempts at objectifying her into the role of lewd mistress and to develop the necessary strength to shun the many pleasures offered to her at the brothel. In the scene where the Commander takes her to a private room at Jisebele's, his expectation is that now, more than ever, she will be able to express her appreciation for the pleasures he has indulged her in through a strong exchange of emotions and feelings. However, Offred surprises him with her "silence" and cold manner, even admitting to herself that she feels as "inert" as ever (Atwood 1985, 266). In 'penetrating' his psyche and learning what his deepest desires are yet remaining 'impenetrable' and emotionally detached, her ability to subvert the system reaches its fullest potential. Offred's resolve to remain distant and unemotional in regards to the Commander ultimately deprives him of the sentimental gratification he so desperately seeks and leaves him feeling powerless and feeble in a world that appears to have spun out of his control. What mastery the Commander thought he had has irreconcilably been transferred into the domain of the feminine.

By studying Offred's interaction with male authority figures in the narrative, it becomes clear that her power derives not only from her ability to stand resilient against oppression, but more importantly from her mental capacity to read into people's actions and contemplate their meaning. What most critics believe to be the major instrument of women's oppression as quantified in the veilemerges in correlation to Offred as an emblem of power and determination. Offred has been able to subvert the system on two major levels. On the physical level, she has not responded to the Commander's efforts at impregnating her, thereby denying his seed the privilege of becoming cocooned within her womb. On the psychological level, she has reversed the gaze back on the Commander and used his desire for emotional fulfillment to plan ways to denude him from all vestiges of power. By the end of the story, the Commander is no longer of authoritative stature or in mastery of vision; when he takes his clothes off in front of Offred in a metaphorical surrendering

of power, he is portrayed as becoming “smaller, older, like something dried” up (Atwood 1985, 267). His ineffective and infertile nature in addition to his selective blindness to Offred’s attempts at gaining mastery denude him of all vestiges of power and prestige. Offred’s old muffled voice breaks through the silence as her tapes are sanctioned as authentic historical chronicles of Gileadean society. The fact that by the end of the narrative, the Commander’s influence recedes and he is no longer of any importance while Offred’s voice is clearly heard rising above all others points to the inevitable shift that has taken place at the level of gender power equations.

CONCLUSIONS: THE VEIL REDEFINED

Atwood’s power in *The Handmaid’s Tale* lies in her ability to represent many different traditions of veiling into one clothing practice adopted by Gileadean women. In the public and private roles that Offred is forced to play, this paradigm of femininity vacillates between two opposing extremes. On the one hand, the feminine appears in the public role of humble and submissive handmaid and on the other it appears as from within the exotic world of Haroun al-Rasheed. These two negative representations of the paradigm of the veil appear clearly in the analysis of critics who discuss male/female gender politics in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In such works, the veil is presented in the image of Lacan’s and Derrida’s notion of femininity as ‘lack’ and ‘masquerade’ where the veil comes to symbolize the lack that is a woman (Coad 2001, 54-67).

What was depicted as ‘lack,’ however, finds new meaning in this essay. The trope of femininity as found in the veil emerges from within the hold of Euro-American Orientalist power discourses and is reconfigured into a positive image of strength and will-power that accords sanctity of mind and privacy of space. In representing a boundary, the veil not only takes on the function of keeping the outside world from meddling in the private domain of the other but it also eventually takes on a more spiritual role of safeguarding the sacred. In keeping its subject covered and protected from inquisitive eyes, this trope of femininity also accords it wearer ascendancy without compromising integrity of values. Atwood’s text with its shift from male supremacy to female empowerment clearly points to the fact that not all that is incomprehensible or hidden (as veiled women) is necessarily weak and vulnerable. The private can often become the most suitable habitat to foster the brave and powerful.

The paradigm of the veil has long been assigned a controversial function within the realm of the exotic as its meanings have been distorted in the interest of Euro-American power discourses. In being associated with patriarchal systems that deny women freedom, it has been disparaged and decreed as an enemy to all woman kind. Believed to represent a void or dark spot that resists invigilation or censorship, it has created fear and anxiety in the Euro-American subject who, in return, has chosen to deny its true representation. By referring back to one of Atwood’s major sources of inspiration for veiling practices in the text, this essay has allowed subaltern discourses to come to the forefront and to speak in a voice unadulterated by the other.

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